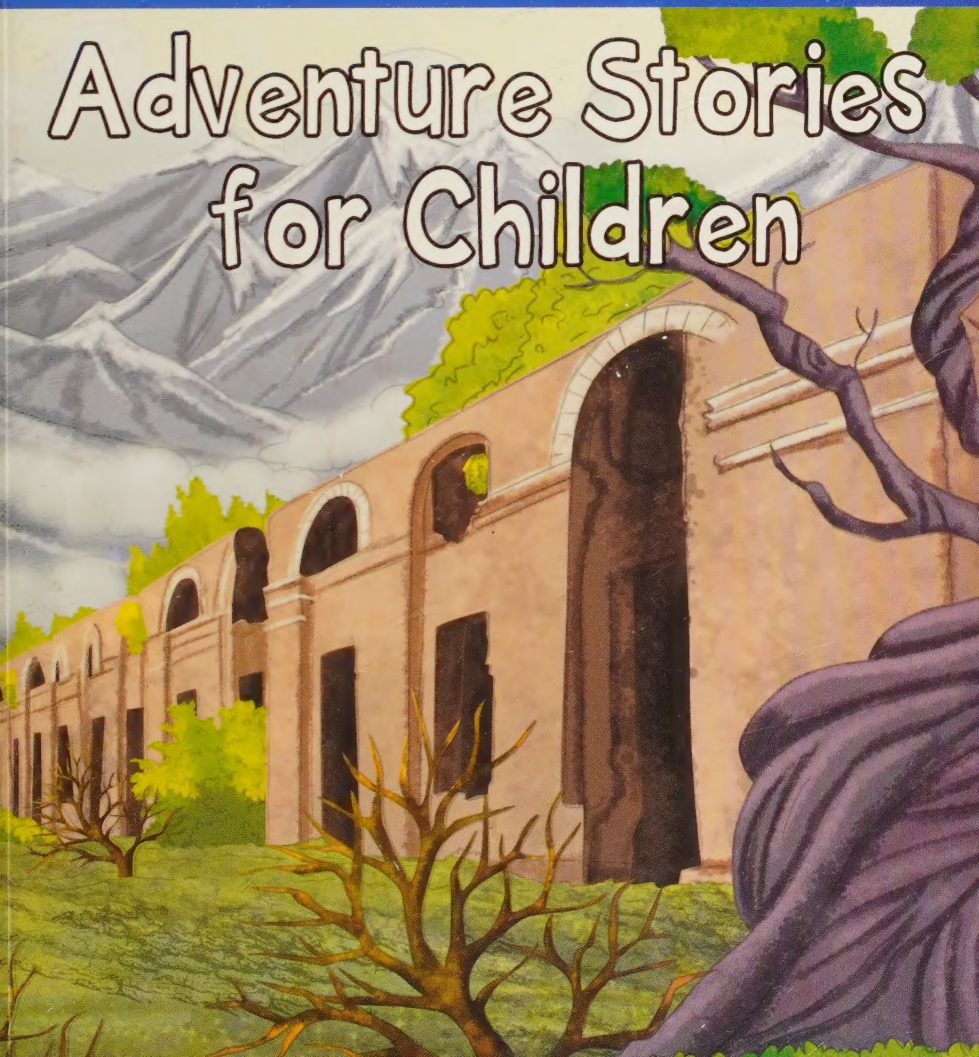


RUSKIN BOND

Adventure Stories
for Children





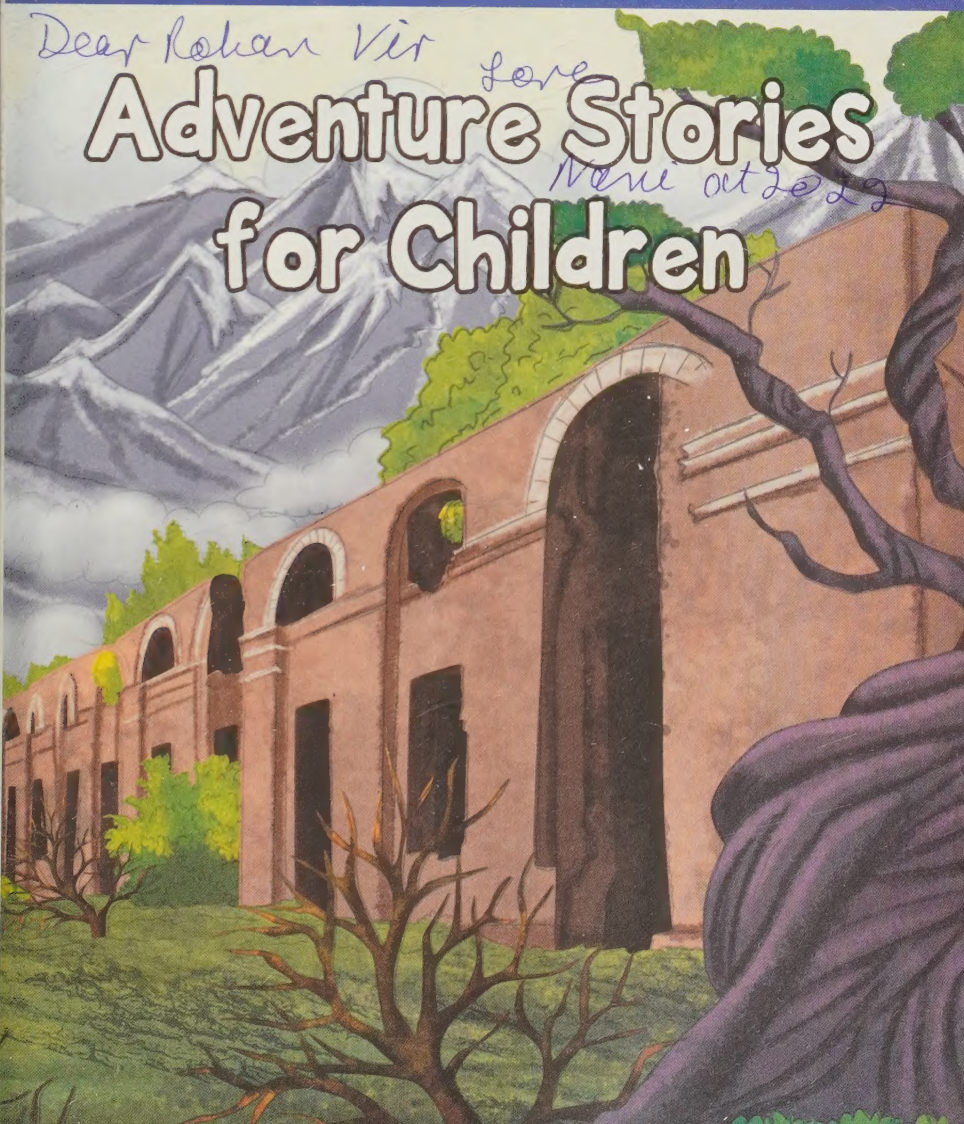
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RUSKIN BOND

Dear Rohan Vir

Love

Adventure Stories
Mene out 2029
for Children





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The Zigzag Walk

Uncle Ken always maintained that the best way to succeed in life was to zigzag. 'If you keep going off in new directions,' he declared, 'you will meet new career opportunities!'

Well, opportunities certainly came Uncle Ken's way, but he was not a success in the sense that Dale Carnegie or Deepak Chopra would have defined a successful man...



In a long life devoted to ‘muddling through’ with the help of the family, Uncle Ken’s many projects had included a chicken farm (rather like the one operated by Ukridge in Wodehouse’s *Love Among the Chickens*) and a mineral water bottling project. For this latter enterprise, he bought a thousand old soda-water bottles and filled them with sulphur water from the springs, five miles from Dehra.



It was good stuff, taken in small quantities, but drunk one bottle at a time it proved corrosive—‘sulphur and brimstone’ as one irate customer described it—and angry buyers demonstrated in front of the house, throwing empty bottles over the wall into grandmother’s garden.



Grandmother was furious—more with Uncle Ken than with the demonstrators—and made him give everyone's money back.

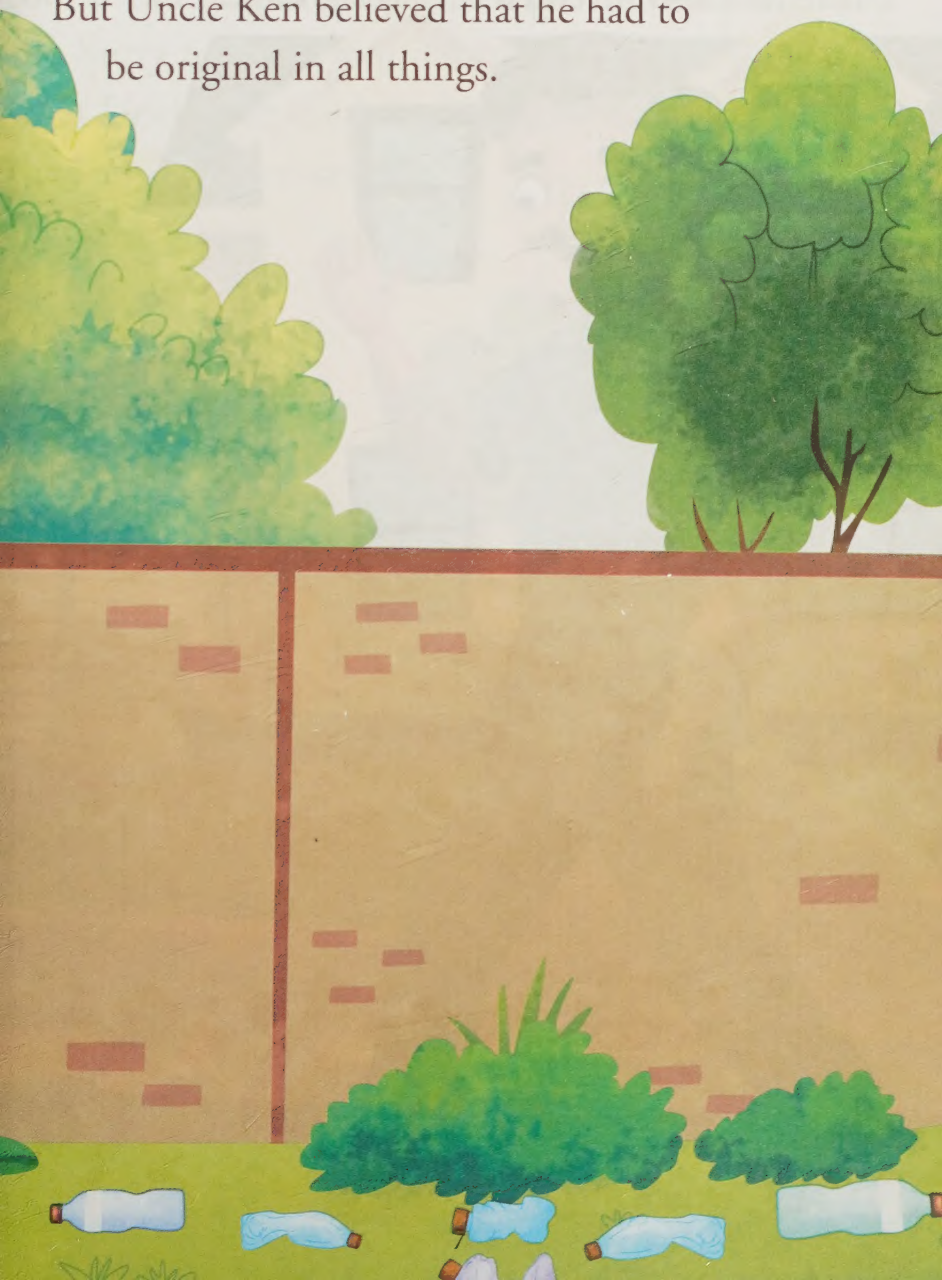
'You have to be healthy and strong to take sulphur water,' he explained later.

'I thought it was supposed to make you healthy and strong,' I said.



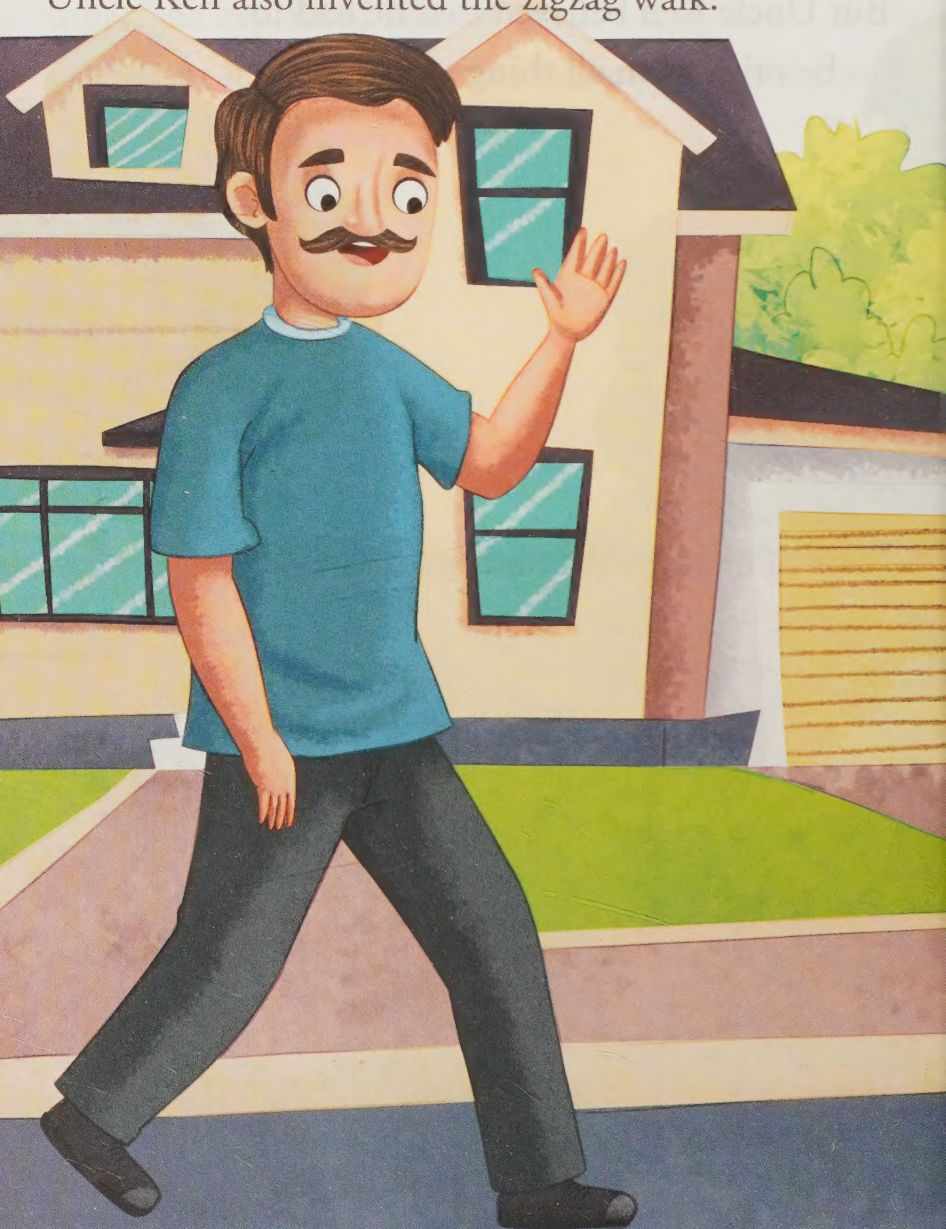
Grandfather remarked that it did not compare with plain soda-water, which he took with his whisky. 'Why don't you just bottle soda-water?' he said, 'there's a much bigger demand for it.'

But Uncle Ken believed that he had to be original in all things.



‘The secret to success is to zigzag,’ he said.
‘You certainly zigzagged round the garden when
your customers were throwing their bottles back at
you,’ said Grandmother.

Uncle Ken also invented the zigzag walk.



The only way you could really come to know a place well, was to walk in a truly haphazard way. To make a zigzag walk you take the first turning to the left, the first to the right, then the first to the left and so on. It can be quite fascinating provided you are in no hurry to reach your destination. The trouble was that Uncle Ken used this zigzag method even when he had a train to catch.



When Grandmother asked him to go to the station to meet Aunt Mabel and her children, who were arriving from Lucknow, he zigzagged through the town, taking in the botanical gardens in the west and the limestone factories to the east, finally reaching the station by way of the goods yard, in order as he said, 'to take them by surprise'.





Nobody was surprised, least of all Aunt Mabel who had taken a tonga and reached the house while Uncle Ken was still sitting on the station platform, waiting for the next train to come in. I was sent to fetch him.

‘Let’s zigzag home again,’ he said.

‘Only on one condition, we eat chaat every fifteen minutes,’ I said.

So we went home by way of all the most winding bazaars, and in North Indian towns they do tend to zigzag, stopping at numerous chaat and halwai shops, until Uncle Ken had finished his money.



We got home very late and were scolded by everyone; but as Uncle Ken told me, we were pioneers and had to expect to be misunderstood and even maligned. Posterity would recognize the true value of zigzagging. 'The zigzag way,' he said, 'is the diagonal between heart and reason.'



In our more troubled times, had he taken to preaching on the subject, he might have acquired a large following of dropouts. But Uncle Ken was the original dropout. He would not have tolerated others.



Had he been a space traveller, he would have gone from star to star, zigzagging across the Milky Way. Uncle Ken would not have succeeded in getting anywhere very fast, but I think he did succeed in getting at least one convert (myself) to see his point: 'When you zigzag, you are not choosing what to see in this world but you are giving the world a chance to see you!'



The Wind on Haunted Hill

Who, who, who, cried the wind as it swept down from the Himalayan snows. It hurried over the hills and passed and hummed and moaned through the tall pines and deodars. There was little on Haunted Hill to stop the wind – only a few stunted trees and bushes and the ruins of a small settlement.



On the slopes of the next hill was a village. People kept large stones on their tin roofs to prevent them from being blown off. There was nearly always a strong wind in these parts. Three children were spreading clothes out to dry on a low stone wall, putting a stone on each piece.



Eleven-year-old Usha, dark-haired and rose-cheeked, struggled with her grandfather's long, loose shirt. Her younger brother, Suresh, was doing his best to hold down a bedsheet, while Usha's friend, Binya, a slightly older girl, helped.



Once everything was firmly held down by stones, they climbed up on the flat rocks and sat there sunbathing and staring across the fields at the ruins on Haunted Hill.

‘I must go to the bazaar today,’ said Usha.

‘I wish I could come too,’ said Binya. ‘But I have to help with the cows.’



‘I can come!’ said eight-year-old Suresh. He was always ready to visit the bazaar, which was three miles away, on the other side of the hill.

‘No, you can’t,’ said Usha. ‘You must help Grandfather chop wood.’

‘Won’t you feel scared returning alone?’ he asked.

‘There are ghosts on Haunted Hill!’



‘I’ll be back before dark. Ghosts don’t appear during the day.’ ‘Are there lots of ghosts in the ruins?’ asked Binya. ‘Grandfather says so. He says that over a hundred years ago, some Britishers lived on the hill. But the settlement was always being struck by lightning, so they moved away.’





‘But if they left, why is the place visited by ghosts?’
‘Because – Grandfather says – during a terrible storm, one of the houses was hit by lightning, and everyone in it was killed. Even the children.’
‘How many children?’

‘Two. A boy and his sister. Grandfather saw them playing there in the moonlight.’

‘Wasn’t he frightened?’

‘No. Old people don’t mind ghosts.’

Usha set out for the bazaar at two in the afternoon.

It was about an hour’s walk.

The path went through yellow fields of flowering mustard, then along the saddle of the hill, and up, straight through the ruins. Usha had often gone that way to shop at the bazaar or to see her aunt, who lived in the town nearby.



Wild flowers bloomed on the crumbling walls of the ruins, and a wild plum tree grew straight out of the floor of what had once been a hall. It was covered with soft, white blossoms. Lizards scuttled over the stones, while a whistling thrush, its deep purple plumage glistening in the sunshine, sat on a window-sill and sang its heart out.



Usha sang too, as she skipped lightly along the path, which dipped steeply down to the valley and led to the little town with its quaint bazaar.

Moving leisurely, Usha bought spices, sugar and matches. With the two rupees she had saved from her pocket-money, she chose a necklace of amber-coloured beads for herself and some marbles for Suresh. Then she had her mother's slippers repaired at a cobbler's shop.



Finally, Usha went to visit Aunt Lakshmi at her flat above the shops. They were talking and drinking cups of hot, sweet tea when Usha realised that dark clouds had gathered over the mountains. She quickly picked up her things, said goodbye to her aunt, and set out for the village.



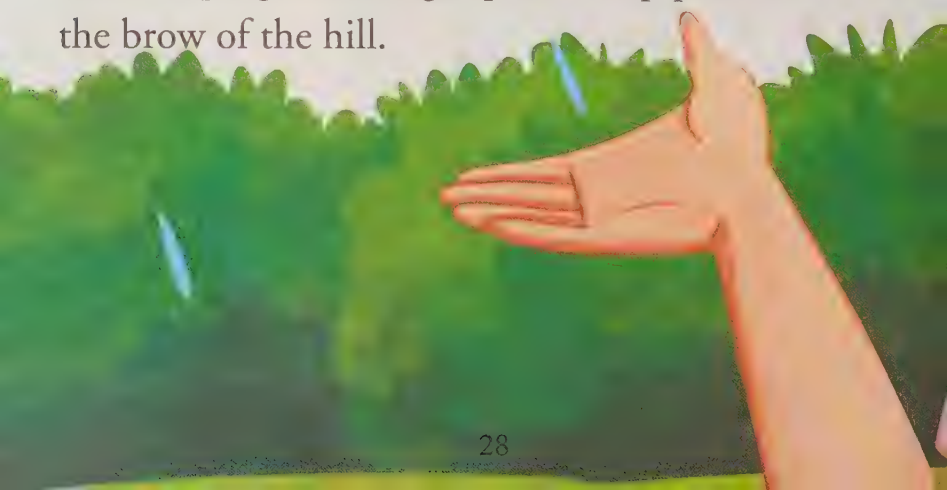
Strangely, the wind had dropped. The trees were still, the crickets silent. The crows flew round in circles, then settled on an oak tree.

‘I must get home before dark,’ thought Usha, hurrying along the path.

But the sky had darkened and a deep rumble echoed over the hills. Usha felt the first heavy drop of rain hit her cheek. Holding the shopping bag close to her body, she quickened her pace until she was almost running. The raindrops were coming down faster now – cold, stinging pellets of rain.

A flash of lightning sharply outlined the ruins on the hill, and then all was dark again. Night had fallen.

‘I’ll have to shelter in the ruins,’ Usha thought and began to run. Suddenly the wind sprang up again, but she did not have to fight it. It was behind her now, helping her along, up the steep path and on to the brow of the hill.







There was another flash of lightning, followed by a peal of thunder. The ruins loomed before her, grim and forbidding.

Usha remembered part of an old roof that would give some shelter. It would be better than trying to go on. In the dark, with the howling wind, she might stray off the path and fall over the edge of the cliff.

Whooh, whooh, whooh, howled the wind. Usha saw the wild plum tree swaying, its foliage thrashing against the ground. She found her way into the ruins, helped by the constant flicker of lightning. Usha placed her hands flat against a stone wall and moved sideways, hoping to reach the sheltered corner. Suddenly, her hand touched something soft and furry, and she gave a startled cry.



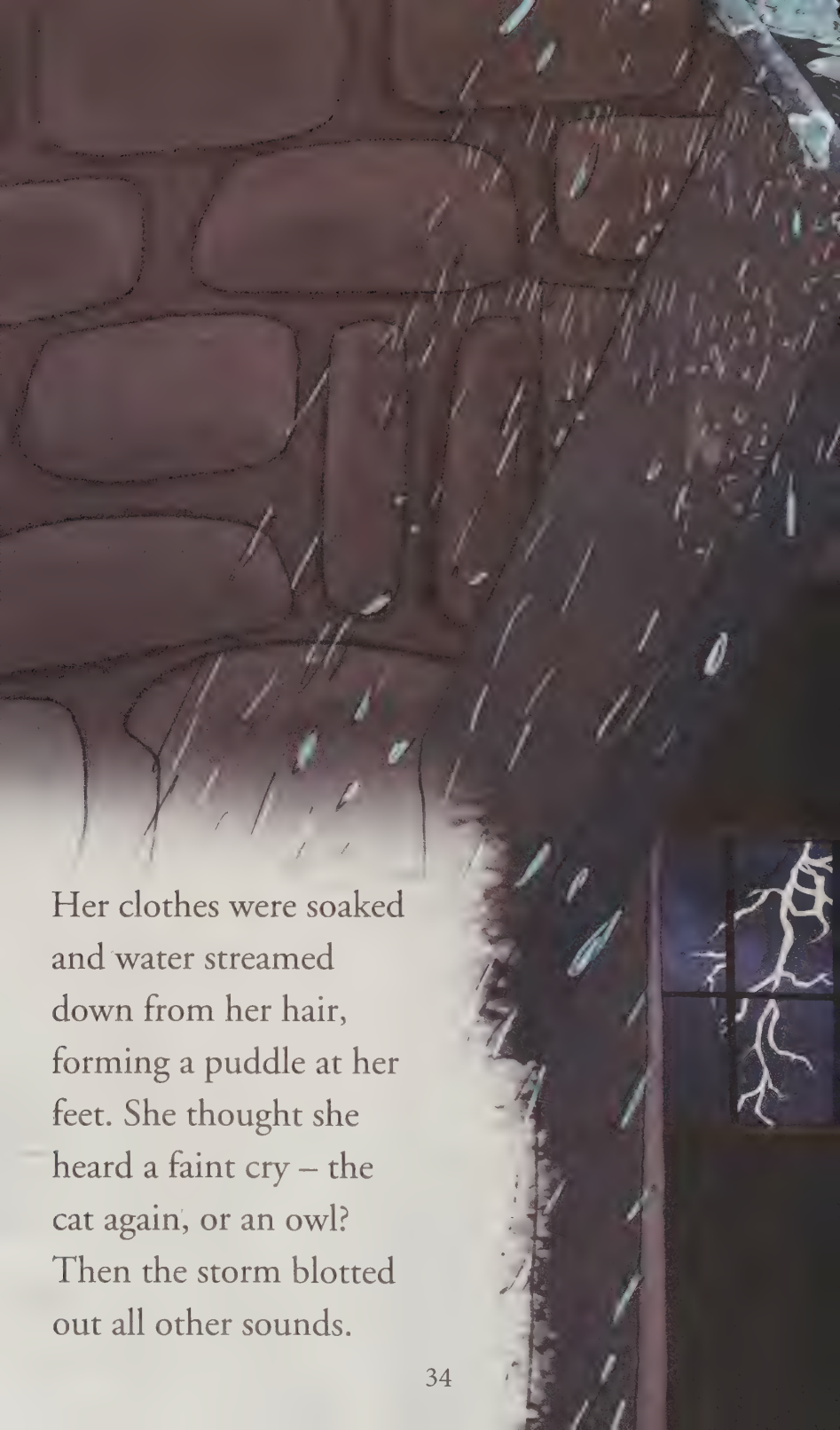
Her cry was answered by another – half snarl, half screech – as something leapt away in the darkness. With a sigh of relief Usha realised that it was the cat that lived in the ruins. For a moment she had been frightened, but now she moved quickly along the wall until she heard the rain drumming on a remnant of a tin roof.



Crouched in a corner, she found some shelter. But the tin sheet groaned and clattered as if it would sail away any moment.

Usha remembered that across this empty room stood an old fireplace. Perhaps it would be drier there under the blocked chimney. But she would not attempt to find it just now – she might lose her way altogether.





Her clothes were soaked
and water streamed
down from her hair,
forming a puddle at her
feet. She thought she
heard a faint cry – the
cat again, or an owl?
Then the storm blotted
out all other sounds.

There had been no time to think of ghosts, but now that she was settled in one place, Usha remembered Grandfather's story about the lightning-blasted ruins. She hoped and prayed that lightning would not strike her.

Thunder boomed over the hills, and the lightning came quicker now. Then there was a bigger flash, and for a moment the entire ruin was lit up.





A streak of blue sizzled along the floor of the building. Usha was staring straight ahead, and, as the opposite wall lit up, she saw, crouching in front of the unused fireplace, two small figures – children! The ghostly figures seemed to look up and stare back at Usha. And then everything was dark again. Usha's heart was in her mouth.

She had seen without doubt, two ghosts on the other side of the room. She wasn't going to remain in the ruins one minute longer.

She ran towards the big gap in the wall through which she had entered. She was halfway across the open space when something – someone – fell against her. Usha stumbled, got up, and again bumped into something. She gave a frightened scream.



Someone else screamed. And then there was a shout, a boy's shout, and Usha instantly recognised the voice.

‘Suresh!’

‘Usha!’

‘Binya!’

They fell into each other's arms, so surprised and relieved that all they could do was laugh and giggle and repeat each other's names.

Then Usha said, ‘I thought you were ghosts.’

‘We thought you were a ghost,’ said Suresh.

‘Come back under the roof,’ said Usha.

They huddled together in the corner, chattering with excitement and relief.





‘When it grew dark, we came looking for you,’ said Binya. ‘And then the storm broke.’

‘Shall we run back together?’ asked Usha. ‘I don’t want to stay here any longer.’

‘We’ll have to wait,’ said Binya. ‘The path has fallen away at one place. It won’t be safe in the dark, in all this rain.’

‘We’ll have to wait till morning,’ said Suresh, ‘and I’m so hungry!’

The storm continued, but they were not afraid now. They gave each other warmth and confidence. Even the ruins did not seem so forbidding.



After an hour the rain stopped, and the thunder grew more distant. Towards dawn the whistling thrush began to sing. Its sweet, broken notes flooded the ruins with music.



As the sky grew lighter, they saw that the plum tree stood upright again, though it had lost all its blossoms.

‘Let’s go,’ said Usha.

Outside the ruins, walking along the brow of the hill, they watched the sky grow pink. When they were some distance away, Usha looked back and said, ‘Can you see something behind the wall? It’s like a hand waving.’



‘It’s just the top of the plum tree,’ said Binya.

‘Goodbye, goodbye...’ They heard voices.

‘Who said “goodbye”?’ asked Usha.

‘Not I,’ said Suresh.

‘Nor I,’ said Binya.

‘I heard someone calling,’ said Usha.

‘It’s only the wind,’ assured Binya.

Usha looked back at the ruins. The sun had come up and was touching the top of the wall.

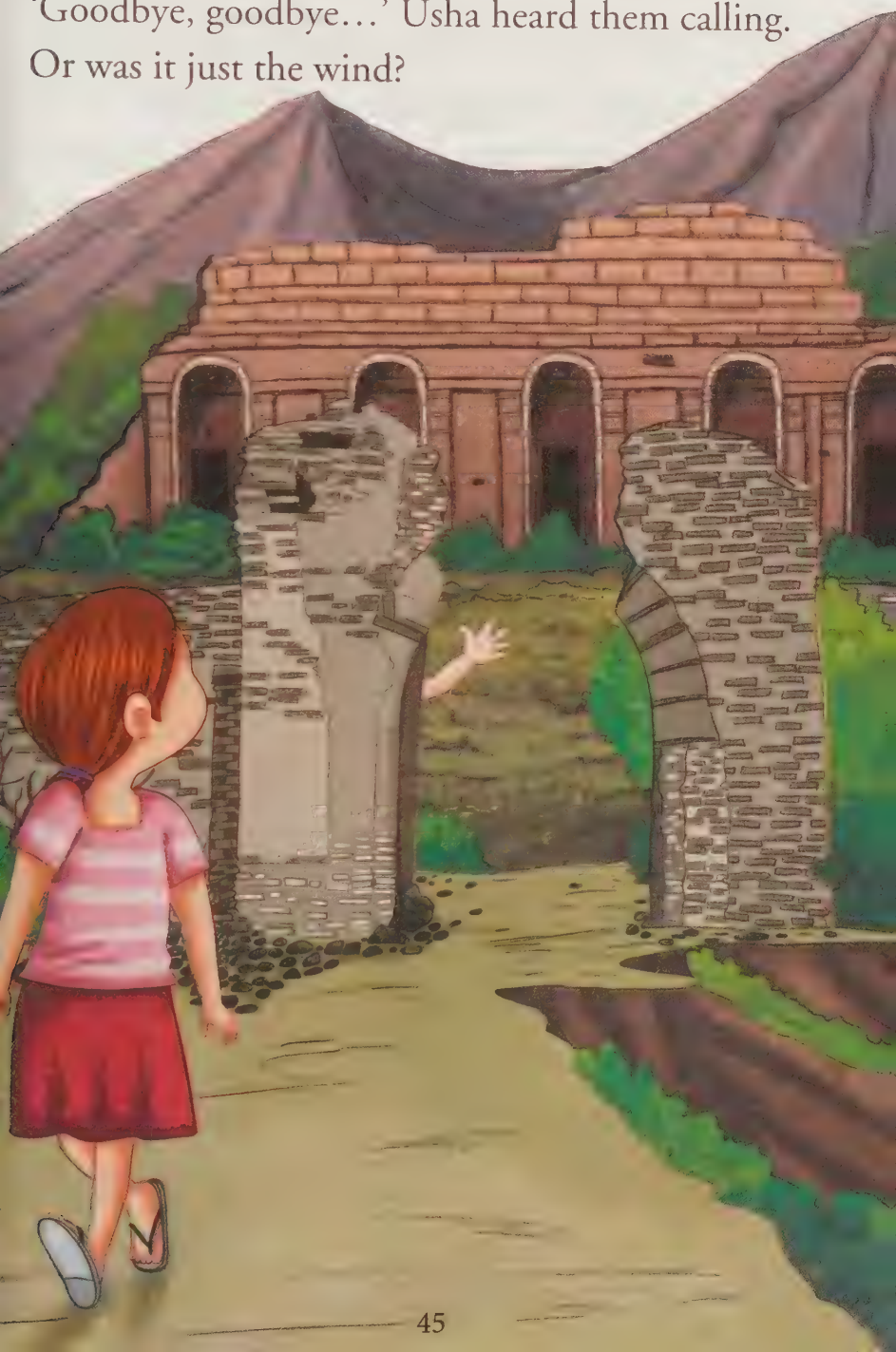


‘Come on,’ said Suresh. ‘I’m hungry.’

They hurried along the path to the village.

‘Goodbye, goodbye...’ Usha heard them calling.

Or was it just the wind?



Wild Fruit

It was a long walk to school. Down the hill, through the rhododendron trees, across a small stream, around a bare, brown hill, and then through the narrow little bazaar, past fruit stalls piled high with oranges, guavas, bananas, and apples.



The boy's gaze often lingered on those heaps of golden oranges – oranges grown in the plains, now challenging the pale winter sunshine in the hills. His nose twitched at the sharp smell of melons in summer; his fingers would sometimes touch for a moment the soft down on the skin of a peach. But these were forbidden fruit. The boy hadn't the money for them.



He took one meal at seven in the morning when he left home; another at seven in the evening when he returned from school. There were times – especially when he was at school, and his teacher droned on and on, lecturing on honesty, courage, duty, and self-sacrifice – when he felt very hungry; but on the way to school, or on the way home, there was nearly always the prospect of some wild fruit.



The boy's name was Vijay, and he belonged to a village near Mussoorie. His parents tilled a few narrow terraces on the hill slopes. They grew potatoes, onions, barley, maize; barely enough to feed themselves. When greens were scarce, they boiled the tops of the stinging-nettle and made them into a dish resembling spinach.



Vijay's parents realised the importance of sending him to school, and it didn't cost them much, except for the books. But it was all of four miles to the town, and a long walk makes a boy hungry. But there was nearly always the wild fruit.



The purple berries of the thorny bilberry bushes,
ripening in May and June. Wild strawberries,
growing in shady places like spots of blood on the
deep green monsoon grass. Small, sour cherries, and
tough medlars.

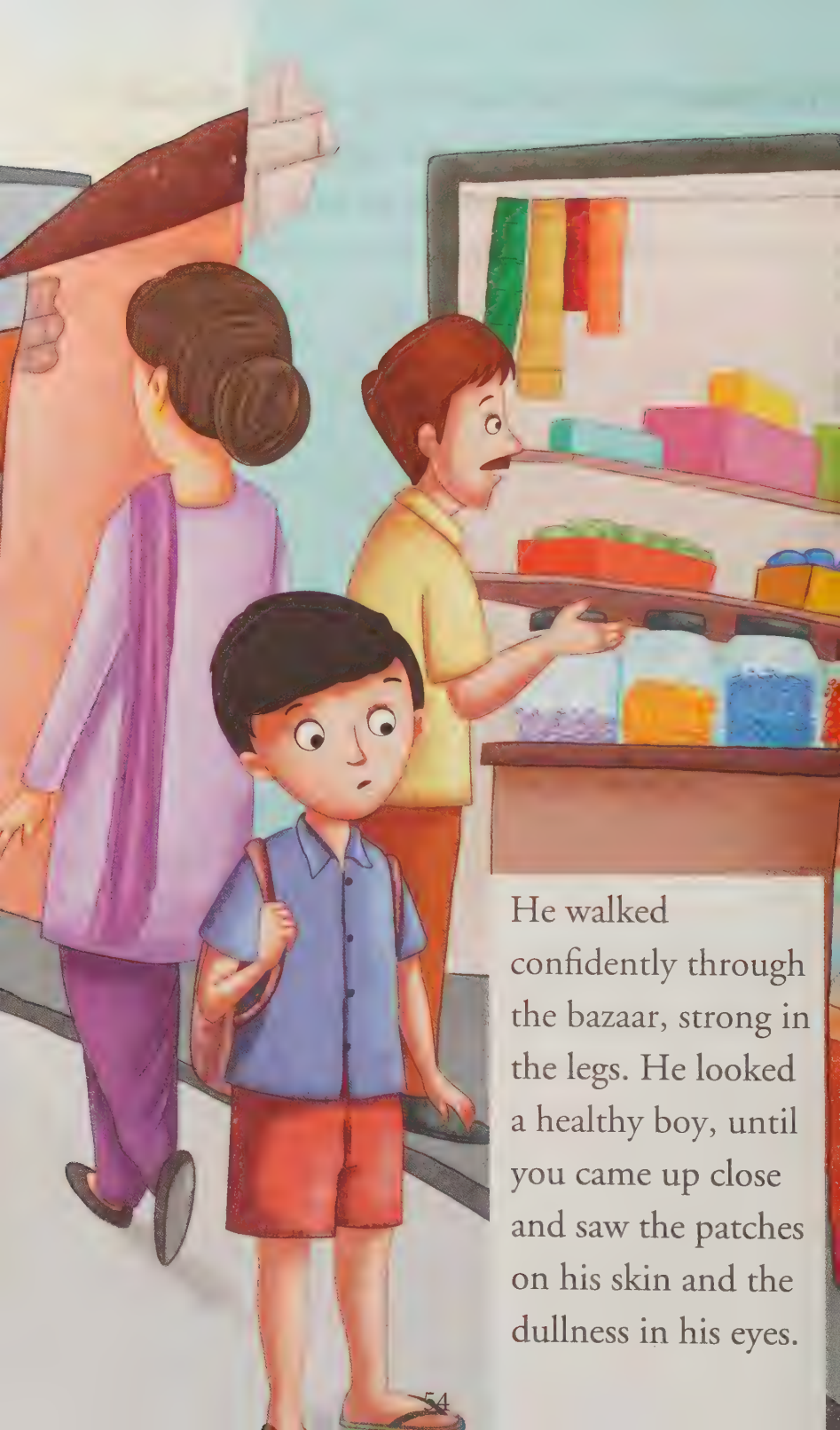


Vijay's strong teeth and probing tongue extracted whatever tang or sweetness lay hidden in them. And in March there were the rhododendron flowers. His mother made them into jam. But Vijay liked them as they were.



He placed the petals on his tongue and chewed them till the sweet juice trickled down his throat. But in November, there was no wild fruit. Only acorns on the oak trees, and they were bitter, fit only for the monkeys.





He walked confidently through the bazaar, strong in the legs. He looked a healthy boy, until you came up close and saw the patches on his skin and the dullness in his eyes.

He passed the fruit stalls, wondering who ate all that fruit, and what happened to the fruit that went bad; he passed the sweet shop, where hot, newly-fried jelabies lay protected like twisted orange jewels in a glass case, and where a fat, oily man raised a knife and plunged it deep into a thick slab of rich amber-coloured halwa.



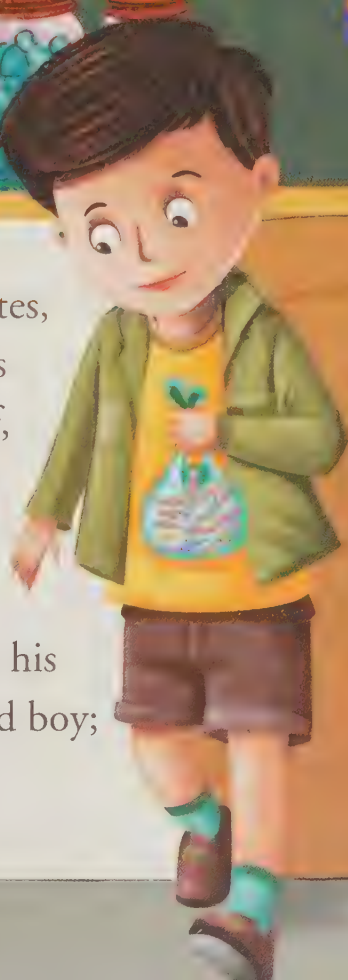
The saliva built up in Vijay's mouth; there was a dull ache in his stomach. But his eyes gave away nothing of the sharp pangs he felt.

And now, a confectioner's shop.





Glass jars filled with chocolates, peppermints, toffees – sweets he didn't know the names of, English sweets – wrapped in bits of coloured paper. A boy had just bought a bag of sweets. He had one in his mouth. He was a well-dressed boy; coins jingled in his pocket.



The sweet moved from one cheek to the other. He bit deep into it, and Vijay heard the crunch and looked up. The boy smiled at Vijay, but moved away.

They met again, further along the road. Once again the boy smiled, even looked as though he was about to offer Vijay a sweet; but this time, Vijay shyly looked away.



He did not want it to appear that he had noticed the sweets, or that he hungered for one.

But he kept meeting the boy, who always managed to reappear at some corner, sucking a sweet, moving it about in his mouth, letting it show between his wet lips – a sticky green thing, temptingly, lusciously beautiful.



The bag of sweets was nearly empty. Reluctantly, Vijay decided that he must overtake the boy, forget all about the sweets, and hurry home. Otherwise, he would be tempted to grab the bag and run!

And then, he saw the boy leave the bag on a bench, look at him once, and smile – smile shyly and invitingly – before moving away.



Was the bag empty? Vijay wondered with mounting excitement. It couldn't be, or it would have blown away almost immediately. Obviously, there were still a few sweets in it. The boy had disappeared. He had gone for his tea, and Vijay could have the rest of the sweets. Vijay took the bag and jammed it into a pocket of his shirt. Then he hurried homewards.



It was getting late, and he wanted to be home before dark.

As soon as he was out of the town, he opened the bag and shook the sweets out. Their red wrappers glowed like rubies in the palm of his hand.

Carefully, he undid a wrapper.



There was no sweet inside, only a smooth, round stone.

Vijay found stones in all the wrappers. In his mind's eye, Vijay saw the smiling face of the boy in the bazaar: a boy who smiled sweetly but exchanged stones for sweets.



Forcing back angry tears, Vijay flung the stones down the hillside. Then he shouldered his bag of books and began the long walk home.

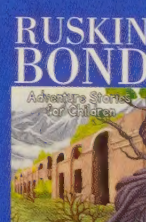
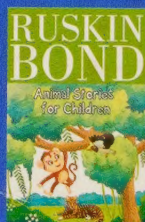
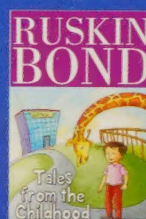
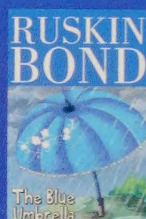
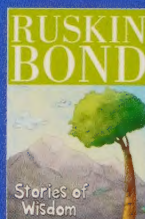
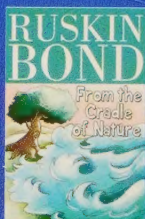
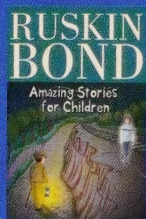
There were patches of snow on the ground. The grass was a dirty brown, the bushes were bare.

There is no wild fruit in November.





Indian author Ruskin Bond's short stories have been charming generations of children for over six decades now, and the mature readers haven't remained unglued either. Three such literary gems by the country's 3rd-highest civilian awardee—*The Zigzag Walk*, *The Wind on Haunted Hill*, and *Wild Fruit*—have been carefully encased in the book **Adventure Stories for Children**. Aside from humour, horror, and present–past flights, the inside illustrations are sure to provide the reader with an impactful vision of the setting and characters.



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